

Observations concerning the Sariska Wild Life Sanctuary, Rajasthan

BY

J. JUAN SPILLETT

(With one plate)

I. INTRODUCTION	..	..	..	..	..	608
II. PROBLEMS						608
Domestic Livestock	..	..	..	..	..	608
Villages	..	..	..	..	..	609
Other Problems	..	..	..	..	..	610
III. ADVANTAGES	..	..	..	..	..	610
Accessibility	..	..	..	..	..	610
Scenic and Other Attractions	..	..	..	..	..	611
Revenue	..	..	..	..	..	611
IV. RECOMMENDATIONS	..	..	..	..	..	612

I. INTRODUCTION

Sariska has the potential of becoming one of India's outstanding national parks. This 80-square-mile sanctuary is readily accessible to visitors throughout the year, contains areas of both natural and archaeological significance, and already has sizeable numbers of many species of wild life. Besides being one of the best areas in India for observing sambar, the sanctuary also harbours large mammals such as bluebull or nilgai, four-horned antelope or chousingha, spotted deer or chital, Indian gazelle, and wild boar. In addition, the sanctuary and its staff have already established a notable reputation for showing tiger regularly to visitors. Leopard are also occasionally seen. However, before Sariska can begin to realize its potential and even before its wild life can begin to attain the vast numbers which it could potentially support, a number of problems must be confronted and overcome.

II. PROBLEMS

Domestic Livestock

The major problem confronting Sariska, as well as most of the wild life sanctuaries in India, is the cancerous disease of overgrazing by domestic livestock. Approximately 10,000 head of livestock, including buffalo, cattle, goats, and camels, are presently grazed inside the sanctuary for a fee. However, based upon my limited observations, the actual

number probably far exceeds the reported 10,000 head. For example during a short walk east of the Tourist Rest House, I observed over 500 goats, almost 200 buffalo, over 100 cattle, and two camels. The number of sheep inside the sanctuary is reported as negligible, but I observed over 300 head. In contrast to fantastic numbers of domestic livestock, only nine nilgai were observed during this walk. It appears rather ironical to call many areas wild life sanctuaries when the numbers of domestic animals far exceed that of the wild animals !

Sariska was visited during the middle of May, which is near the end of the dry or summer season. Most of the domestic animals observed in the sanctuary were extremely thin and emaciated. Such animals are of little value to anyone. They cannot work, they produce no milk, and in such a condition they are often not even able to breed. Without exception, all the areas which I visited inside the sanctuary were severely overgrazed. All available forage had been utilized and many areas were badly trampled. Due to recent rain, evidence of erosion was also present.

Villages

The second major problem confronting Sariska is the presence of villages inside the sanctuary. Most of these villages are small and their total population is probably less than 2500 people. Although these villagers cultivate little land, most subsist primarily upon grazing animals. Domestic buffalo are their primary source of income and goats and cattle take secondary importance. Milk from these animals is used chiefly in the production of ghee (clarified butter), but some milk is also sold to the Central Training Institute of the National Fitness Corps located in the former shooting lodge of the Maharaja of Alwar across the highway west of the tourist rest houses. The presence of these villages creates a number of problems. First, as has already been discussed, overgrazing by their livestock is a major problem. Forest abuse and other practices, such as crop protection or poaching with muzzle-loading 'crop-protection' guns, also present difficulties to the sanctuary. It would be desirable, if at all possible, to resettle these villagers and their livestock on other forest department lands outside of the sanctuary. Such action would eliminate most of the sanctuary's major problems.

It is realized that to advocate the maintenance of Sariska as an inviolate wild life sanctuary at the present is impractical. However, a few key wild life areas could be selected and maintained as inviolate to all commercial exploitation, including the grazing of domestic livestock and the extraction of forest produce. The ancient practice in India of establishing a 'sanctum sanctorum' has worked very well in other areas, such as the Bandipur Wild Life Sanctuary in Mysore. Initially it may be necessary to fence off such an area, but this could quite easily be done with relatively few materials in one of Sariska's picturesque canyons.

Even without considering the sanctuary or its wild life, simple economics demand that all grazing and forest exploitation in the commercially exploited areas be strictly controlled and managed. In addition to collecting fees for all domestic livestock, methods must be devised so that animal numbers do not exceed the carrying capacity of the forage. Rotational grazing methods should be considered. These would at least ensure that all grazed areas would periodically be protected from all grazing for an entire year. This would permit forage plants to set seed and perhaps permit the re-vegetation of the most desirable plant species. All management should seek to provide the greatest returns for all concerned, while, in so far as is possible, leaving the sanctuary and its wild life unimpaired as a part of the nation's heritage. Only by so doing can the greatest benefits for all be realized.

Other Problems

Poaching, particularly from vehicles along the sanctuary's roads, does not appear to be a major problem in Sariska. This is further demonstrated by the fact that most wild animals in the sanctuary pay little heed to approaching vehicles. However, these same animals are often extremely wary of a man on foot. Most of the poaching that does occur in Sariska would probably be eliminated with the removal of villages from inside the sanctuary.

Visitor facilities presently consist of two tourist rest houses at Sariska. Each accommodates four people. The Forest Department is constructing another near-by rest house, which will accommodate an additional 14 persons. Therefore, the sanctuary will have accommodations for 22 visitors for the 1966-67 season. However, even this will not be sufficient during the peak visitor season between November and April or to accommodate entire groups arriving by Tourist Department tour buses. It is suggested that additional dormitory facilities be constructed or that as soon as the new tourist rest house is completed the other two be converted into dormitories. Not all facilities need to be first class, but accommodations for a minimum of 40 persons are essential so that visitors may be provided at least basic facilities or accommodations.

III. ADVANTAGES

Accessibility

Although problems confronting Sariska have been presented, the potential or advantages of this unique area by far outweigh the problems. The major advantage is that of accessibility. Many of India's sanctuaries or parks are virtually inaccessible to the average tourist or to a person without a vehicle. In contrast, regular daily bus services between Delhi and Jaipur will drop or pick-up the visitor to

Spillett : Rajasthan Sanctuaries.



Above : The Tourist Lodge and lake at Van Bihar. *Below :* A chital stag with antlers in velvet in Sariska.

(Photos : J. Juan Spillett)

Sariska at the gate of one of the tourist rest houses. The well-constructed and scenic National Highway No. 8 passes directly in front of the rest houses and passes through 13 miles of the sanctuary. Delhi is 124 miles to the north and Jaipur 67 miles to the south. Extending from the National Highway the metalled Pandupole-Thela Road forks six miles inside the sanctuary. One fork continues an additional seven miles to the Pandupole Temple and the other also seven miles to the village of Thela. Both pass through exceptionally scenic canyons inhabited by sambar and nilgai. In addition to metalled roads, forty miles of fair weather roads are maintained inside the sanctuary. A jeep is provided by the Forest Department for the use of visitors so that they may easily observe the wild animals.

Scenic and Other Attractions

Sariska consists primarily of a desert scrub forest intersected with steep rocky canyons. The sheer rock cliffs and the frequent oases of palms combined with the ease with which visitors can view wild life all make Sariska a unique experience. Excellent opportunities of seeing tiger at a kill from a comfortable and well-constructed tower, visiting the interesting Pandupole Temple (site of regular pilgrimages), viewing or climbing the stairway through a large natural arch or bridge, or visiting the partially excavated archaeological ruins dating back to the 9th century should make a visit to Sariska a memorable experience for anyone. These numerous attractions deserve national attention. It appears that not even a portion of the full potential of this fabulous area is realized. Sariska should not be considered as just another wild life sanctuary, but as a part of the nation's heritage and a valuable economic asset. A small but well-planned and managed capital investment in Sariska could easily result in a bounteous harvest.

Revenue

Although the potential of Sariska as a notable tourist attraction has not begun to be realized, the sanctuary is already a source of substantial amounts of revenue. An income of between Rs. 1.5 and 2.0 lakhs is annually realized from the sanctuary's forest produce. This is chiefly from the commercial exploitation of *dhok* (*Anogeissus pendula*) and other tree species (i.e. *Acacia* spp. and *Zizyphus* spp.) for firewood or the production of charcoal. The production of *katha* (a paste used on betel leaf) from the heartwood of *khair* (*Acacia catechu*) is also of importance.

Grazing fees for domestic livestock presently total between Rs. 50,000 to 60,000 per annum. Professional graziers are charged Rs. 10 per adult buffalo for camps inside Class I forest areas (the best grazing), while villagers are charged Rs. 8 per head in these same areas. A Rs. 6 fee is charged per adult buffalo in Class II areas and Rs. 4 in Class III or the most arid parts of the sanctuary. Fees for adult cattle are Rs. 3